

Tamás Kun

GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS AROUND THE HORN OF AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: *The Red Sea crisis has significantly altered cargo routes in maritime transport, resulting in a ten percent increase in shipping costs and several days longer transportation times. Around the Horn of Africa, several attacks occurred that were carried out by Houthi rebels from Yemen. The Iran-backed group uses these attacks as a form of message to the United States and its allies, showing sympathy for Gaza in the Israel-Hamas War. The neighbouring Djibouti had to reinforce its coast guard patrols to ensure security and respond to the rising tensions in the area. The paper examines the situation in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, analysing the possible reasons behind the strikes against vessels and other targets in the region, where all members of the “Four Policemen” were present in the arrangement of the conflict.*

KEYWORDS: *Red Sea crisis, maritime transport, proxy war, international security system*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tamás Kun, PhD candidate, Óbuda University, Doctoral School on Safety and Security Sciences (ORCID: 0000-0002-6620-7157; MTMT: 10069630).

INTRODUCTION

The Four Policemen was a postwar concept and the messenger of the United Nations after World War II, where the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and China came together as guarantors of peace in the world. In President Franklin D. Roosevelt's vision, these nations would provide security by overseeing activities through their sphere of influence.¹ This concept influenced world affairs for roughly 75 years. After the Cold War, major powers fought for dominance in trade, the United States' hegemony had shrunk from its former glory, compared to it taking up about half of the globe's GDP alone after WWII. After several incidents, the USA made a proposal to its allies in order to establish an alliance to counter the rising threats. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced Operation Prosperity Guardian in December 2023. At the start of the year, CNN reported on US and UK strikes in response to the Iran-backed Houthi attacks. Western powers transferred serious capabilities in the region to support Israel. Both in traditional and social media, some reports often mention the connections between the Hamas-Israeli War and the Red Sea crisis. The **international security system** (ISS) is going through a vivid transformation, where these new proxy wars are milestones along the way.

¹ Miscamble 2009.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE ISS AND THE MILITARY RESPONSES FROM MAJOR POWERS

Transportation of goods via sea is a crucial point in international trade and the extension of power, which was a key element in the US military doctrine for decades after the Second World War. In this field, a potential rival is China, which is actively seeking opportunities to challenge the USA and trying to acquire dominance in trade. These issues have the potential to make further impact on the affected parties, where economic and humanitarian crises are already on the table. Maritime shipping is key to getting the primary position in global trade, since most of the goods are transported via sea shipping.

Robert Tucker wrote² in 1980 that “It is the Gulf that forms the indispensable key to the defense of the American global position, just as it forms the indispensable key without which the Soviet Union cannot seriously aspire to global predominance.”³ In military performance, to be a global player, a nation state must have the ability to control sea operations. International terrorism was also a key problem⁴ in the region. After the arms embargo in 1992, the international community believed that the threat had been stopped at least in the Horn.⁵ In 2008, piracy in the Gulf of Aden region accounted for 37 percent of all reported piracy activities.⁶ In the 2000s, Somali pirates were very active,⁷ which sparked similar international cooperation as we see today. The Djibouti Code of Conduct included actions to repress piracy activities in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden.⁸ Djibouti is a strategic location for the major military powers in the world.

On 19 October 2023, Yemen’s Houthis launched missiles and drones at Israel, demanding the end of the conflict in the Gaza Strip. Later on, this act led to the Red Sea crisis. After months of attacks on Red Sea shipping targets, the USA and the UK launched airstrikes against Houthi targets across Yemen.⁹ Houthi sources claimed that they had attacked a US warship, however, they could not provide evidence for it.¹⁰ Among the European allies, the US involvement in the Israel-Hamas conflict was not welcomed at first, nor were the strategic goals of **Operation Prosperity Guardian**. However, on 19 February 2024, the EU also launched its maritime security operation named **Operation Aspides**. In order to counter the rising threat in the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Persian Gulf, the EUNAVFOR mission started its activity to protect and safeguard commercial vessels in the region.¹¹ A popular phrase is circulating in the comments section on YouTube, saying, “Yemen has the right to defend itself.” There is competition between superpowers and regional powers for the control of ports, which might lead to war at a point because of the rising foreign military presence around the Horn of Africa.¹² In March 2021, the Chinese-owned Ever Given container ship blocked the Suez Canal for six days. This accident highlighted the

² Tucker 1980.

³ Aliboni 1985.

⁴ Besenyő 2023.

⁵ Besenyő – Sinkó 2022.

⁶ Chalk 2009, 2.

⁷ Shortland – Vothknecht 2011.

⁸ Kraska – Wilson 2009.

⁹ Stewart et al. 2024.

¹⁰ Gambrell 2024.

¹¹ European External Action Service 2024.

¹² Ashine 2024.

weight and necessity of this trading route in the global economy.¹³ The ongoing military conflict between Ukraine and Russia, as well as the unrest in the Middle East, underlined the fragility of shipping networks and supply chains. The attacks carried out by the Houthis from Yemen have redrawn commercial shipping routes, by switching from the Red Sea to the Cape of Good Hope due to geopolitical tensions in the region.¹⁴ The old international security system, where major powers had different approaches to military activities, is under transformation. Western powers reacted by making an international alliance, led by the USA. China used its diplomatic channels to negotiate its positions. Russia used these events to engage in diplomatic clashes with its adversaries.

United States

Considering the seriousness of the circumstances, the USA did not hesitate in its response to the events. “The Red Sea is a critical waterway that has been essential to freedom of navigation and a major commercial corridor that facilitates international trade.”¹⁵ Operation Prosperity Guardian is a multinational security initiative under the flag of the Combined Maritime Forces of ten countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, and Spain.¹⁶ The USA deployed naval capabilities to the region, namely the USS Florida, a cruise missile submarine that took part in the attack on Yemen carried out in January 2024, the USS Philippine Sea, a guided missile cruiser, and two Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers, the USS Gravely and the USS Mason. It also deployed aerial capabilities, including 22 fixed-wing USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carriers (Figure 1).¹⁷

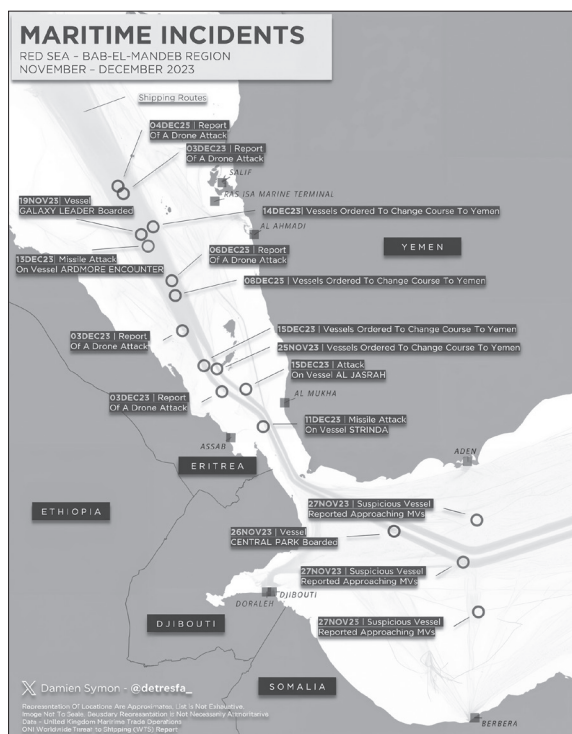


Figure 1 Red Sea – Bab-el-Mandeb region maritime incidents

Source: Symon 2023

¹³ Mechai – Wicaksono 2024.

¹⁴ Yap – Yang 2024, 121 (104004).

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Defense 2023.

¹⁶ Helou 2024.

¹⁷ Liebermann et al. 2024.

United Kingdom

From November 2023 to February 2024, HMS Diamond, a Royal Navy destroyer, led the UK's maritime response to Houthi attacks. It was replaced by HMS Richmond and subsequently by HMS Duncan.¹⁸ More than half (55%) of UK exporters reported that they had been disrupted while shipping in the Red Sea.¹⁹ In the present, the UK provides great support for the US. The UK maintains an organization called the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO), which is an office that has experienced a significant increase in the number of incident reports. UKMTO recorded a 475 percent increase in incidents reported by seafarers in the Middle East since the attacks began in autumn 2023, with over 2,500 emails received by the HQ daily.²⁰ This crisis showed the UK its dependence on the United States, which is an ironic situation because in the past, the United States' key

fear factor was that the British Royal Navy could be dangerous to the USA's independence.

The map (Figure 2) shows a decrease in the High Risk Area (HRA). In the square, the old HRA can be seen from December 2015, and the dashed lines mark it as of 1 May 2019. As announced on 22 August 2022, the Indian Ocean HRA for piracy would be removed completely at 00:01 UTC on 1 January 2023. The area under removal, shown as the High Risk Area, can be seen in the UKHO Chart Q6099.²¹ The decision was explained on the basis that piracy activities were about to drop.

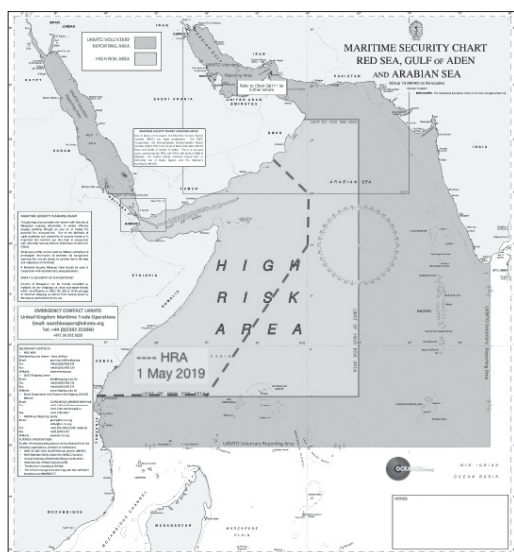


Figure 2 IOR High Risk Area

Source: Oceanuslive.org 2019

Russia

In response to the escalation of military procedures in the Gaza Strip, the Ansar Allah (Houthis) movement warned that they would carry out strikes against Israeli territory and prevent ships connected to the conflict from bypassing the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Since November 2023, the group has targeted dozens of commercial vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.²² Russian officials reacted harshly to the news about the West's response to the Houthi attacks. The Kremlin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said that they were 'illegitimate'. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged a UN Security Council meeting to discuss the recent events. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, US representative to

¹⁸ House of Commons Library 2024, 20.

¹⁹ BBC 2024.

²⁰ Royal Navy News 2024.

²¹ Baltic International Maritime Council 2022.

²² TASS 2024.

the UN, referred to Article 51 of the UN Charter, stating that response measures were taken to ensure the freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce.²³ President Putin claimed that the new geopolitical situation supports the idea of a Northern Sea Route that runs around Russia's Arctic coastline. He also used this opportunity to promote an alternative trade route that connects Russia to the Indian Ocean via Iran.²⁴ The Russian Federation used these attacks as a perfect opportunity for diplomatic clashes with the West. Political interests often precede material ones because the country is rich in material resources. The Hamas-Israeli conflict provided the necessary means to engage in proxy conflict with the US. Their relationship became closer with Iran due to their 'Special military operation' in Ukraine. Also, they have broadened their cooperation with BRICS countries, further developing bilateral agreements and expanding their membership, which is now referred to as BRICS plus, counting 10 members with Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates joining the group. The 15th summit of the BRICS countries was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, on 22–24 August 2023.

China

On 23 March 2024, the Houthis launched four anti-ship missiles at a Chinese-owned oil tanker in the Red Sea, regardless of the existing non-aggression agreement between the two sides. The Chinese military eventually did not intervene, based on the principle that the primary targets of the attacks were the US and its allies.²⁵ The current tensions around the Suez Canal are bothering Chinese investors because they have invested a lot of money in the support of the safe passage of commercial vessels.²⁶ From the perspective of the People's Republic of China, these events are about to make room for challenging the US trade dominance in the world. The Communist Party negotiated a deal with the Houthis that Chinese ships would remain unaffected by the Yemeni operations. However, there was a case when a Chinese-owned oil tanker was hit by anti-ballistic missiles. It could happen because there were intelligence-related issues around the ownership of the vessel. Nevertheless, it was a blow to Chinese diplomacy.

EFFECTS ON AFRICAN COUNTRIES AROUND THE HORN

Djibouti hosts several foreign military bases, which ensure the security of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. It is in the best interest of African states to establish a forum for negotiations to mediate among major powers, as was the case during the Qatar diplomatic crisis.²⁷ "Port of Djibouti is the only port that adopts the International security standards for ships and ports on the Horn of Africa."²⁸ The continent is already facing difficult economic challenges due to the Russo-Ukrainian War, from where grain and fertilizer imports are expected. These events further deepen problems with availability and rising costs. Insurance premiums have gone up, and

²³ Thomas-Greenfield 2024.

²⁴ Meyer 2024.

²⁵ Samaan 2024.

²⁶ Cash 2024.

²⁷ Vertin 2019.

²⁸ Maashi 2017, 50.

longer routes block the way towards economic growth and stability.²⁹ For the African community, it means a harsher race for opportunities that could guarantee the background for future development. The Russo-Ukrainian War showed how an eruption in the global supply chain can affect economies all over the world. In the case of the African continent, the Black Sea Grain Initiative was a good example of how the conflict among global actors can endanger societies relying greatly on grain imports. Russia used this issue actively in its foreign policy narratives, promising tons of grain exported to African countries. Russian President Vladimir Putin promised free grain for six countries: Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, Mali, Somalia, Eritrea, and the Central African Republic.³⁰



Figure 3 *The Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden*

Source: Walker 2024

The Bab el-Mandeb (which means “Gate of Grief” or “Gate of Tears” in Arabic) is a strait that separates Djibouti from Yemen, where the Red Sea conflict takes place. Houthi fighters have launched several rockets at Israel-related ships since November 2023. In response to the ongoing events, Djibouti reinforced its coast guard patrolling services. The country achieved serious developments in economic growth in recent years, and the ongoing crisis would threaten its results. It hosts many foreign military bases; however, Djibouti is not taking part in the US-led coalition strikes against the Houthis.³¹ The events in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean provide opportunities for piracy activities. The changed course of actions, adopted by the rest of Africa, also opened doors for new looting spots, especially when vessels must sail close to the coast.³²

²⁹ Walker 2024.

³⁰ Heintz et al. 2023.

³¹ Africanews 2024.

³² Vreÿ – Blaine 2024.

CONSEQUENCES FOR WORLD TRADE

In the centre of the recent conflict are Yemen's Houthi rebels, who took hold of the world's highest-traffic maritime straits with the intent of supporting the Hamas war against Israel in the Gaza Strip. The Houthis' interest is to tie international actors' hands via sabotaging their supply chains in trade, similar to the situation in the 2000s with Somali piracy. However, this conflict goes beyond regional matters.³³ The Suez Canal Route takes a 10–15 percent share of global trade operations.³⁴ The port city of Piraeus faced a decrease in its container transport volume. In June 2024, it experienced a 10.1 percent drop in container arrivals in comparison with the 12.9 percent decline in the first half of the year. Also, Cosco-managed terminals in Spain, namely Valencia and Bilbao, reported an increasing trend with 31 percent in June and an uptrend of 13.2 percent for the first and second quarters of the year. The two terminals in Piraeus (Piers II and III) had a turnover of 366,500 TEU³⁵ in June, lagging behind the 407,600 TEU from the previous year, while having 1.95 million TEU in the first six months of the year compared to the 2.25 million TEU from 2023. At the Spanish terminals, they managed 344,200 TEU in June compared to the 262,800 from the previous year, and altogether 1.75 million TEU in the first half of the year compared to the 1.54 million TEU from 2023.³⁶ Shipping companies are about to alter their routes toward the Cape of Good Hope. This would result in longer shipping times and an increase in fuel consumption and crew time, leading to a rise in the cost of transport, which would later be passed on to customers.³⁷ An UNCTAD report claimed that the alternative routing could result in an additional 70 percent increase in greenhouse gas “emissions for shipping routes from Southeast Asia to Northern Europe”.³⁸ There is a 20–30 percent increase in USD per FEU³⁹ rates on the four largest container shipping routes in the world. Demand peaked at a record high of 9.2 percent increase in Q1 2024 compared to the same period the previous year, at a time when there was pressure on shipping capacity due to the crisis in the Red Sea.⁴⁰

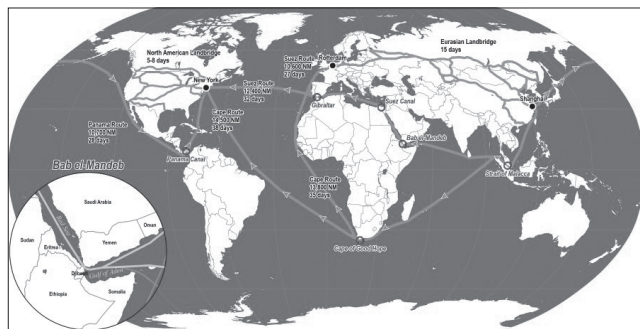


Figure 4 *Shipping routes map*

Source: Notteboom et al. 2022

³³ Carson et al. 2024.

³⁴ Ziady 2024.

³⁵ TEU: twenty-foot equivalent unit; term used in shipping to determine the amount of container traffic.

³⁶ Glass 2024.

³⁷ Lenderking 2024.

³⁸ Peng et al. 2024, 19.

³⁹ FEU: forty-foot equivalent unit; term used in shipping to determine the amount of container traffic.

⁴⁰ Stausbøll 2024.

On this map, we can see the traditional shipping routes. The Suez route has been sabotaged by the ongoing conflicts; an alternative to it is the Cape route, but it is eight days longer. The Russians came up with the idea of a Northern Arctic route, which is probably in their financial interest, too. The disruption in this region mostly affects European supply chains, with the Shanghai-Rotterdam line facing serious delays in the transportation of goods. This 10,600-nautical-mile-long route normally takes 27 days with a speed of 16 knots, while the alternative Cape route is considerably longer, with 13,800 nautical miles, taking 35 days with a 16-knot speed. The change in the shipping route adds an extra week to the transit time, but 10 to 14 days is more common according to the ports report. Cargo and ship insurance rates increased by 1 percent of the total cargo value compared to the general 0.1 percent level.⁴¹ Another source claims that the route change can lead to even a 20-day delay in shipping.⁴²

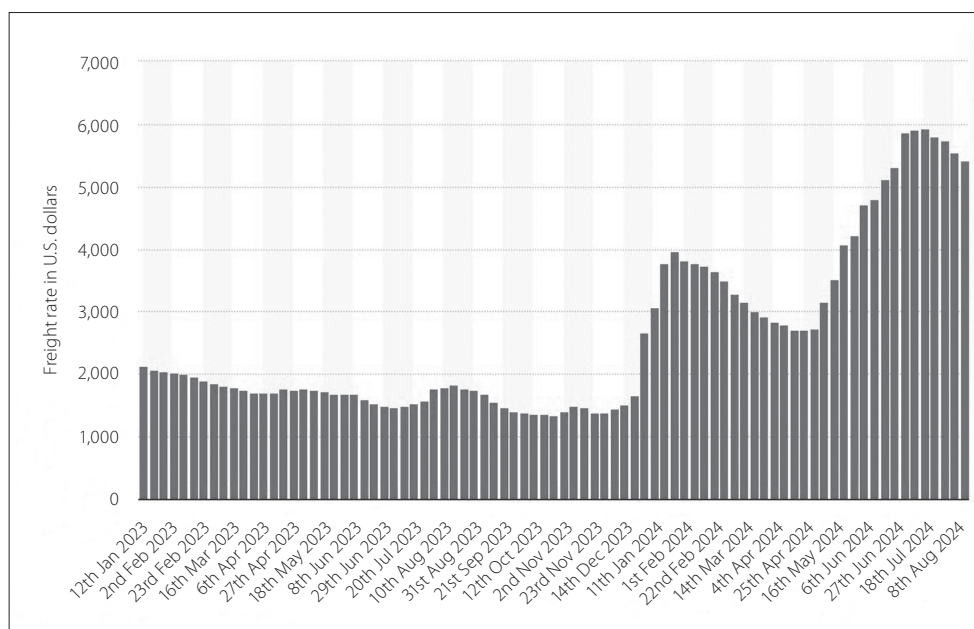


Figure 5 Global container freight rate index from the 12th of January 2023 to the 15th of August 2024 (in U.S. dollars per 40-foot container)

Source: Statista.com 2024

Data show how a container's shipping price has changed between 2023 and 2024. In the rates, we can see a spike at the start of 2024 due to tensions rising over the months after the beginning of the Hamas-Israeli war and the escalation of events, which led to insecurity in shipping. The international response from the 'Big Four' further raised the stakes, as they used the situation developed in the region for their strategic interest. Since April 2024, the cost of shipping a container has doubled, going up from USD 2,706 to USD 5,901. Shipping fares on the China–Northern Europe lane have increased by 523 percent compared to the previous year. In addition, shipping from China to the US East Coast has gone up by 246 percent.⁴³

⁴¹ Port Economics, Management and Policy 2024.

⁴² Marinero 2023.

⁴³ Crown World Mobility 2024.

CONCLUSION

The Red Sea conflict poses serious challenges to the US dominance in the region and may be globally, too. It is also troublesome that, at least on the narrative level, a military group is claiming an open attack against the world's most formidable military force. The forming of alliances on both sides of the conflict deepens the arrangement of the already hostile state of the current world affairs. There are visible signs of the Russian-Chinese cooperation at least on the diplomatic level, which might be seen as a prelude to the UN General Assembly voting sessions. China strategically refuses to get involved in the current matter, which can be explained by both military and commercial interests. We are already in a 'post-policeman' era as we spectate the geopolitical tensions around the Horn of Africa, which represents a choke point of foreign affairs. The Suez Canal also had key importance in both World Wars since it is a critical pathway from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean. A new equilibrium situation is emerging that will go beyond the scope of the UN Security Council's permanent members.

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